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CONTINUING

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CONCEPTIONS of the character of Jesus the Christ vary with times and circumstances. From the days when a jealous village-folk could see in him only a carpenter turned itinerant preacher to the days of the latest vendor of Utopias, the eternal Christ has been misconceived and wrongly described. Not that he has been totally misconceived or totally caricatured. The past has not been altogether wrong any more than the present is altogether right. In both alike are there to be discovered elements of opinion that both correctly and incorrectly represent the Son of Man. The mistake generally has consisted in confusing a partial with a complete presentation. Today as never before does the thinking portion of the church need to distinguish between the essential and the purely transitory elements in its thoughts of its Master.

TODAY'S misconceptions of Jesus are a tribute to the extent of his influence. Their very number shows how all men are looking towards him. There never was a day when men of all shades of belief and all sorts of aims claimed more eagerly or more confidently the sanction of the teacher of Nazareth. It is because he is so widely known that he is so ill known. The zeal for a partial has devoured the zeal for a complete master, and the real Christ is lost in enthusiasms that boast his approval.

It is easy to think of Jesus as one of the long line of victims to political idealism. As men's hearts grow warm with the new wine of municipal reform, they are very ready to find inspiration in him who turned swindlers out of the temple, and counselled the honest payment of taxes. Was not his death due to corruption? The treasurer of his new kingdom—what was he but a spoilsman who embezzled the kingdom's funds and then sold out its king? The analogy is easy and the application telling. In the name of the Master let us purge the polls, turn rascals out of office, clean city streets, form civic federations.

Worthy aims these—aims that spring directly from the higher conception of life given the world by the words and life of Jesus. To minimize the need of municipal purity and Christian citizenship would be to brand oneself a fool or a knave. But he who sees in Jesus simply a type of civic reformer, or who gets from his words calls to political energy alone, is sadly limiting and misinterpreting the Christ of the gospel.

NOR was Jesus primarily a social reformer. No man ever struck out more vigorously against vice, no man was ever more sympathetic with fallen men and women, no man ever set in motion such mighty forces of reform; but it is shocking to our deeper reverence for him to think of his mission as confined to the sphere of social environment, or of his interest in publicans and harlots as purely scientific. We expect from him no studies in statistics, no measuring of foreheads and thumbs, no colored maps, no philanthropic experiments, no legislation, no investigating committees. If he consorts with the abandoned classes it is neither in the spirit of the professional investigator nor in that of an amateur in human misery. He is a Healer, not a sociologist, a Saviour, not a reporter. He accomplished reforms, but he was more than a reformer. He saved men but he was more than a philanthropist.

*JESUS NOT A
MERE CIVIC
REFORMER*

*NOR YET A
SOCIAL
REFORMER*

STILL less was Jesus the champion of any one class of society. He was not an enemy of the rich and a friend only of the poor.

*STILL LESS A
CHAMPION OF
ANY SOCIAL
CLASS*

If he gave the multitudes free meals, he also dined with the rich. If he was homeless, he was the guest of the Pharisee. If he ministered to others, he also was ministered to from the substance of wealthy women. If he suffered between thieves, he was with the rich in his death. To make Jesus a communist is to juggle with words and ignorance. He attacks neither monopolies nor capital. He knew the dangers that lie in riches, and the aid distress lends to faith, but he never so far loses his intellectual balance as to teach that a man is any better because he is poor or holier because he is miserable. His kingdom was indeed for the poor—but for the poor in spirit. His command to sell possessions and give alms is no more universal than his command to pluck out an eye is literal. Jesus expected that his kingdom would be composed neither of beggars nor of men bereft of common sense. Great economic changes are undoubtedly in the gift of the future, but Jesus no more taught socialism than he sought to perpetuate the Roman empire or the temple tax. Good politics and equitable distribution of wealth, it is to be hoped, will result from Christian civilization, but Jesus stands committed to no scheme or ready-made millenium. In his kingdom there are no distinctions of sex, or country, or social status. He was not the champion of a class, but the Son of Man.

It is more difficult to feel that Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels as something more than a teacher of magnificent ethics.

*NOR WAS HE
SIMPLY A
MORALIST*

The world's tribute to Christ's moral teachings is certainly not blind. Respect for age will never prevent an honest man's acceptance of a new system in place of an old if once it be proved the better, and if a better morality than that of Christ's comes it must be and will be accepted. But until that new and better system comes,—and who yet sees the sign of its coming?—the word Christ will be supreme. No man has yet spoken like this man. Never-

theless the glory of Jesus lies not in the addition of a new ethical code. The sermon on the mount is hardly more Christian than human. Few of its maxims are not more or less successfully duplicated in other religious systems. If the gospel be nothing more than ethical teaching, the utmost we can say of it is that it is the best extant formulation of a universal sense of righteousness. But Christ is more than a Confucius, or an Epictetus. The essence of Christianity is not teaching but a Teacher.

AND the essential power of that Teacher was not his pedagogy but himself. As John says, God sent his Son, not mere information. Without Jesus the gospel would be as cold and as impotent as the tables of stone on which was cut the law. Here is the striking fact of the gospels. The world has seen many a genius, many a poet, many a prophet, many a teacher and reformer, but it has only one Christ. And the character that looks out from the incomplete records is not that of a man that speaks in his epitaph, but a most real and living personality. Men admire Socrates, they love Jesus. Age after age has asked itself what this Son of Man might be, and age after age after trying to call him poet or prophet or sage or teacher, has thrown such categories aside and has found satisfactory only the words of Peter—"Thou are the Christ of God."

AND this is not the word of logic but of experience. Doctrines must forever be liable to restatement and redefinition, but the religious nature and the religious experience that doctrines express are constant. The true significance of this confession of all men lies not in its accuracy of definition, but in its instinctive recognition of something divine in Jesus. He is and has been to the world not merely a teacher but the representation of God to man. In him mankind has found the satisfaction of its religious needs. Explain it as one will, the testimony of millions is a

corroboration of the words to Philip, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father."

THIS historical phenomenon is beyond dispute. The race may have been mistaken, Christian hopes may have been but deceits that led to virtue and myths that sustained martyrs,—any equally improbable hypothesis may be true,—it counts nothing. The fact remains that deceived or not deceived Christians have experienced a regenerating, personal influence that they have traced to Jesus Christ. In other words, history interprets and corroborates the gospel's representation of Jesus as essentially the consummation of humanity and the incarnation of the divine nature. The race with Christ in it is not what it was with Christ out of it. Knowledge of God is no longer so limited or so difficult as it was without the knowledge of the God-man. To limit him as do any of the views that we have called misconceptions is to manufacture a new Christ. So long as New Testament teachings and human experience are at one, so long is such a product uncalled for and delusive. It is well to appreciate all the many forms of helpfulness that are to be found in the gospel story, but it is infinitely better to realize that our Christ is greater than his admirers and greater than the partial pictures his admirers paint. There is real danger that in their endeavor to be social reformers and municipal censors, our religious teachers may forget that religion is at the bottom of every lasting reform, and that the Christ they preach, so far as men thus far know, is the one sure means of arousing religious emotions and of satisfying religious desire.

As far as we have any knowledge, Jesus Christ is portrayed and felt to be something more than reformer or teacher. He was both but he was more. He was the Son of God.